The Richmond Farm School: An extension education program to prepare 21st century urban and peri-urban farmers

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Our objective

to expediently, effectively prepare urbanites to engage in urban and near urban agriculture

- Local- regional
- Low input
- Small scale
- Human intensive
- Highly productive
- Direct market
- In and around cities
Metro Vancouver

Green = lands in the Agricultural Land Reserve
Population 2.1 million, will double by 2040

22 municipalities, 6th largest and fastest growing city in Canada

283,183 ha with 41,035 ha (15%) farmland

Farmland valued at >$250,000/ha

Highly fragmented, 88% <26ha, half <4ha

25% of provincial gross ag. income from 14% of ALR

Commodities dominate: berries, dairy, poultry, vegetables

Farmers aging; 25% fewer farms last 10 years

$5 billion spent on food annually
A unique place: but typical of rapidly urbanizing agriculture areas

Richmond Farmland, Graham Osborne
Our rationale

- Peak oil
- Climate change adaptation and GHG mitigation
- Great interest in local agri-food systems
- Dearth of farmers, and growing old
- Food sovereignty and self reliance
- Urban sustainability, resilience
- Connecting urban-culture with agri-culture
“End of transnational-global agri-food system” and “Resurgence of local agriculture, bottling, canning, processing eminent”

M. Simmons
Global Oil Depletion and Implications for the Pacific Northwest
2006
50 million farmers needed in U.S. and Canada for de-industrialized, post-oil agriculture

20% of our population

R. Heinberg
Post Carbon Institute
2006
Get small or get consolidated

Percent Change in US Farms by Acreage Category, 1997 to 2002
Simple and straightforward

- Agriculturists teaching and aspiring neo-agrarians learning
- Combination of classroom and experiential
- No entrance/eligibility requirements
- No assignments, papers, exams, grades
- No credential awarded
Features

- Sessions late afternoon and weekend
- Flat fee ($5000) for entire program; individual classes available but more expensive
- Couples and business partners = one enrollee
- Starts late winter, ends late fall
- Run on cost recovery basis - 10 enrollee breakeven
- Students eligible for municipal “incubator” farmland w/ technical support and shared equipment
A partnership
Municipality of Richmond
Richmond Food Security Society
Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing Project
Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Classes - 350 hours

Soils and Water Management (40 hrs)
Plant Science (40 hrs)
Pest Management (20 hrs)
Farm Production and Operations Planning (30 hrs)
Seed Saving (10 hrs)
Market Crop Production (50 hrs)
Animal Husbandry (50 hrs)
Fruit Production (50 hrs)
Composts and Composting (20 hrs)
Farm Business Planning/Management (40 hrs)
Practicum - 350 hours

Supervised farming experience for duration of the season

All operations - planning, planting, cultivation, harvest, sales

2 acre truck crop operation

1.5 acre orchard

Greenhouse and hoop houses

Farmers market and CSA
After preparing a business plan students qualify for “Incubator Farm Plots”
Farm School teachers

- Urban and peri-urban small scale farmers
- Community experts
- Professors
Farm School students

- 7 in 2010; 10 in 2011.
- All urbanites- w/ limited agriculture experience, knowledge or education
- Age range 20’s - 60’s; mean= 44 years
- Slightly more women (60%)
- All with post-secondary experience-most professionals
- All committed to sustainable living/society
Outcomes - Year 1

2 students incubator farming (CSA) on municipal land
2 students working on Vancouver Is. farm
Couple working to farm independently
1 student urban lot farming
1 student managing municipal urban farm
Student feedback

- Attracted to focus on sustainability, mix of class and field studies and informal learning environment
- Appropriate subject mix for small scale farming
- Experiential element good/ need for improved practicum coordination
- Like variety of teachers/ developed good relationships
- Prepared to farm but need more experience/ mentoring
- Mixed feelings about viability of UA
Potential articulation

Bachelor of Applied Science - Sustainable Agriculture

at Kwantlen Polytechnic University fall 2012
Replicable in cities throughout British Columbia
Municipalities take a lead role in the full integration of the agri-food system within the planning, design, development and function of cities and vice-versa.

Community focused, human scaled, ecologically sound, in and around cities, for and by residents, in all of its dimensions.
Our challenge as planners, developers and policy-makers of the built environment... is to figure out how to strengthen agriculture systems and... and connect them to livable cities and their consumers.
Connecting urban-culture with agri-culture